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ABSTRACT

There is ample theoretical and experimental evidence showing the positive impact of interest on academic achievement to suggest that college administrators might be well advised to include "expressed interest" in test batteries designed to facilitate the accurate placement of students in particular courses and curricula. J. Dewey was the first to attempt to define interest, asserting that it came from within a person, resulting from the connection of the self to an object. E. Thorndike, agreeing with Dewey that interest was a self-expressed activity, proposed that using the learner's interest was the key to learning. Followers of Thorndike surveyed students' interest in particular subjects, correlating results with academic achievement to find a strong correlation between the two. Later studies found a correlation between grades and student motivation, but these investigated the effects of external rewards as opposed to the earlier studies of intrinsic interest. Within the past decade, reading research has shown a positive correlation between students' expressed interests and reading achievement. Occasionally, students' interests have been incorporated in predictive batteries and used as further sources of variance in the prediction of academic success. One study found that the variance provided by the interest inventory made a unique contribution in significantly increasing the validity of predicting grade point average. (HTH)

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THE IMPACT OF INTEREST ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Myrna B. Charry

Research in affective factors related to academic performance, particularly at the college level, is continuing in the hope of providing additional data in the prediction of academic achievement. On affective factor, "expressed interest" (Super and Crites 1962) has received sporadic attention since Thorndike (1935) and his followers conducted their experiments.

An early investigator of the impact of interest on academic achievement was Dewey (1913) who argued that interest was the prime motivator of effort. Recently, Asher et. al. (1978) found that interest was a significant factor in student achievement. Although evidence has been amassed indicating that interest impacts positively on achievement, interest has rarely been used by administrators as a source of variance in the prediction of academic success. In particular, since both Thorndike (1917) and Strong (1943) found that adult interests were stable factors, it appears that college administrators might be well advised to include "expressed interest" in test batteries which are designed to facilitate the accurate placement of students in particular courses and curricula.

Definition

Philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries wrote about interest; however, Dewey was the first to attempt its defini-

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tion. At first, Dewey (1913) subsumed interest under consciousness. Later, he wrote that:

> To say that a present experience is connected with a past, is to say that it is related to the self, in a definite way, and this relation to self is what we mean by interest . . .

According to Dewey's etymology, interest (inter-esse) meant " . . . to be between . . ." a person's consciousness and his actions and represented the union of internal and external factors (Dewey 1913, p. 21). He objected to the notion of making something interesting because he asserted that interest had to come from within, resulting from the connection of the self to an object.

Agreeing with Dewey's notion that interest was a self-expressed activity, Thorndike proposed that using the learner's interest was the key to learning (Thorndike 1935, p. 108). He noted that interest was a learned "want" as opposed to a biological "want" and concluded that:

> Interest and motives . . . influenced life in two ways: by predisposing a person beforehand to connect certain responses with certain situations, and by modifying these connections when they have occurred. Interest and motives cause certain connections to occur . . . (Thorndike 1935, p. 47)

Thorndike differentiated between intrinsic and extrinsic interest and defined intrinsic interest as an activity performed without concern of consequences. In contrast, he contended that wages and

profits were examples of extrinsic interests which he defined as activities dependent on external consequences. Strong (1943) also noted that interest connoted activity arising from within. Super and Crites defined expressed interest as " . . . the verbal profession of interest in an object, activity, task or occupation . . ."

Experimental Research

Early investigators of interest surveyed students' interests in particular subjects, correlating results with academic achievement. Another type of investigation used normative scales of interest, correlating the interest level of reading material with reading achievement. The research based on normative scales (Gates 1930) noted that interesting material facilitated achievement. The research based on surveying techniques presented strong positive correlations between students' expressed interests and their achievement.

Among the earliest psychologists to survey students' interests and correlate the results with achievement was Truman Kelley (1914) who attempted to predict the success of high school students from their expressions of interest in that subject. He found correlations of .46, .33 and .30 between preference scores and marks in English, History and Mathematices, respectively (Kelley 1914, p. 32). Shortly after, Thorndike examined students' expressed interests and their final

college grades and found a .89 correlation between these two factors (Throndike 1917, p.170). Followers of Thorndike conducted similar experiments and found correlations ranging from .33 to .76 between interest and achievement (Wyman 1926, King 1931, Chauncey 1932).

Surveys of students' interests and correlational research fell under the aegis of "motivational research" during the nineteen fifties. McClelland et. al. (1953) found mean correlations of about .50 between college grades and students' motivation. However, these researchers investigated "extrinsic interest" and the effect of external rewards on achievement as opposed to the studies of Thorndike and his followers who studied "intrinsic interest."

Within the past decade, reading research has shown a positive correlation between students' expressed intrinsic interests and reading achievement. Surveying students' interests, Schnayer (1968) noted that the higher the interest, the better the comprehension. Evidence from the studies of Daniels (1971), Estes and Vaughan (1973) and Asher (1978) demonstrated that interest affected reading comprehension scores. Pearson and Johnson (1978) summarized the research findings: " . . . changing a student's motivational state /interest/ will alter comprehension." Vaughan (1972) also noted that students' interests frequently enable them to succeed at task which otherwise would

have been too difficult.

Occasionally, students' interests have been incorporated in predictive test batteries and used as further sources of variance in the prediction of academic success. In one experiment, Bendig (1958) included the Edwards' Personal Preference Schedule in a test battery to predict college achievement (as measured by grade point average). He found that the variance provided by the interest inventory made a unique contribution in significantly increasing the validity of predicting grade point average. Similar results were found by Elliot (1972) and by Thompson (1971) who concluded that prediction of college success can be profitably pursued in non-cognitive areas.

Conclusion

There appears to ample theoretical and experimental evidence to show that interest impacts positively on academic achievement, particularly at the college level. Perhaps it is time for college administrators, in an attempt to provide cost-efficient education and stem the tide of attrition, to examine students' expressed interests and to incorporate this factor in placement and screening procedures.

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